

2004 Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs National Training Conference

Cynthia Church, Assistant Secretary for Public and Intergovernmental Affairs: We turned what could have been a very damaging image breaker into a cheerleader that validated our department's mission.

Phil Budahn, VA Director of Media Relations: I have long since ceased being surprised by the lack of information that any given reporter or produced has about us.

Announcer: In the event of a public relations crisis, will your office be prepared to face media criticisms and tough questions? At this year's Public and Intergovernmental Affairs Conference, attendees got a taste of just what that might feel like. And they learned how to respond. Tried and true tactics on the right way to handle a tough interview.

Far from falling deep into hot water, these public affairs officers were coached on turning a tough negative TV experience into a positive opportunity.

Ozzie Garza, VA Regional Director of Public Affairs, Dallas, Texas: We train public affairs officers how to work with the media and at the same time not to see them, not as adversaries, but certainly somebody who can help you get the message across to the people you ultimately want to reach.

Church: So even in times of crisis where we think we may never be able to get anything good out of the experience, we have those golden opportunities, as was evidenced by Prime Time.

Prime Time Announcer: America's veterans, they fight for our lives overseas. Should they have to fight for first-class care back home?

Church: Overall, we turned what could have been a very damaging image breaker for the department into, quite honestly, a cheerleader that validated our department's mission.

Carmen Gonzales, Texas Paralyzed Veterans, from an ABC News excerpt: I have found that, overall, the care is very good and veterans are very well taken care of.

Henry Luklanchuk, veteran: If they had not done the testing they did on me, I wouldn't be here today.

Reporter: What you're telling me is they saved your life.

Luklanchuk: More or less.

Announcer: But communication in a crisis is just the tip of the iceberg in the many duties of a public affairs officer.

Daniel L. Cooper, VA Undersecretary for Benefits: I think the primary thing to get out of a conference like this is an understanding of what PAO - public affairs – can do for the total organization. Public affairs is a support function that supports us in getting the word out to all the people. It helps us to reach out to people such as ex-POWs, World War II veterans, and veterans from the Gulf War, all those people we want to reach out to and make sure they realize what it is that we can do for them.

Announcer: In addition to outreach, public affairs officers all over VA act as the communicators for their programs. They're charged with everything from publishing departmental newsletters to speechwriting. They act as official spokespersons, steering the media to more knowledgeable people when necessary.

In a given day, a public affairs officer might give a tour to a visiting dignitary or plan a publicity campaign.

Michelle Spivak, PAO, Washington DC VAMC: My job here at the Washington, DC, VA Medical Center has so many facets. I'm both an external communicator and an internal communicator. And as an internal communicator, I think that's probably my most important role because I have to inform both patients and employees of all of the procedures and policies and activities of the medical center.

One thing that's really important about the conference is that you bring back knowledge that you can directly apply to your job as a public affairs officer.

Cooper: Once I got out of the service and got on a couple of boards, I realized important it was that we understand just how public affairs people work and so I'm very supportive of what you're doing here.

Announcer: The VA's top leaders all spoke at the conference, communicating their goals and leaving no doubt in anyone's mind the value that they place on public affairs.

John Nicholson, VA Undersecretary for Memorial Affairs: This is the largest expansion in the history of the National Cemetery Administration. There will be ceremonies and activities in planned acquisition, groundbreaking, dedications. All these things involve public affairs.

Jonathan Perlin, MD, VA Undersecretary for Health: I think this conference is so important in terms of shaping our collective identity, reinforcing our identity.

Announcer: During lunch on the third day of the conference, Secretary Principi explained that he has taken steps to have public affairs and intergovernmental affairs included in all top decisions.

Principi: I rely very heavily on them as to what our positions should be, what our approaches should be to an issue, whether its Prime Time or C.O.R.E. F.L.S. or

CARES. And I think if we've had any success, its because we have been able to have that one voice and communicated effectively.

Announcer: And effective communication can determine whether VA is seen in a positive or negative light. Positive public perception is a powerful thing.

Principi: We work in an arena and a society in which perception is reality. Two hundred and twenty-eight years ago, public perception was the flash point igniting an American revolution that changed the course of history. In a government deriving its powers from the consent of the people, public opinion always has been and always will be the foundation of our great democracy.

Announcer: After opening the floor to questions, the Secretary was asked about his own public affairs techniques. He stressed the straight-forward approach.

Principi: Just being humble, honest, straight-forward. I think it has been somewhat successful. I've made mistakes, but just try to improve upon it. That's what I've done.

Announcer: And that is just what the conference is designed to do: To improve techniques. Conference organizers provide participants with a week's worth of total immersion in presentation and strategy. Classes include everything from speech writing and how to handle public affairs as a collateral duty to production of a cable access T.V. show.

This training prepares public affairs officers for the wide variety of duties that might be expected of them.

Church: On a basic level you have to provide certain tools, because as a public affairs officer you are going to be charged with having to do press conferences or be the voice, the primary communicator, for your facility or learning from the experiences of those around you, your fellow public affairs officers.

Announcer: Public affairs officers attended classes like strategy sessions that build relationships between peers through discussions of typical situations that public affairs officers might face. It allows novice class members to benefit from the greater experience of their peers.

Linda Thompson Green, PAO, Cincinnati VAMC: There's so much information here; there's a wealth of knowledge. What I've learned most is that people are willing to share. Where they've made mistakes, they're been willing to share so it will keep me from doing it.

Announcer: Assistant Secretary Church also encouraged networking and relationship building with local and national media.

Church: Who we are, what we do, how well we do it as communicators rests with the relationships we build not only among ourselves and VA as a whole, but with our stakeholders.

Announcer: Open discussions within the conference allow for the exchange of ideas at higher levels of administration as well.

Church: I think of all the things that we've been through in 2004, the one that was most taxing for the department. The one with legacy, is the CARES decision.

Announcer: So Assistant Secretary Church brought members of the CARES public affairs team together in a panel to talk about the roll-out. The public affairs officers implementing the strategic plan were able to limit the initial barrage of criticism that CARES came under by reaching out and spreading the message that this program would ultimately help the nation's veterans.

Church: At its core, CARES is greater access to health care for more veterans closer to where they live. How we went about strategically communicating the Secretary's decision and all the things that will follow as a result was key to setting CARES on its proper path.

Announcer: The conference culminated with a visit to the D-Day museum.

Church: It was easy to pick New Orleans for the site of this year's conference simply because we wanted the opportunity to come here to see this museum.

Announcer: French Vice Consul Bayer presented the Legion of Honor, the highest military award given by the French government, to all American World War II veterans who participated in the liberation of France.

Bayer: With this gift, we remind every visitor to the D-Day museum that the French will never forget.

Announcer: Secretary Principi presented an official copy of the original GI Bill to the museum. This legislation was signed by President Roosevelt in 1944. This bill, considered by some to be the best piece of legislation ever passed by Congress, created a new middle class after World War II. It offered subsidized education and made low-interest mortgages available to veterans who otherwise wouldn't have dreamed of going to college or owning a house.

Principi: I am honored to present the museum with a copy of the original Bill and I am especially pleased to do so in this glorious memorial to our greatest generation – the men and women who, in the peace they purchased used the provisions of this great legislation to, once again, lead our nation to unprecedented greatness.

Announcer: And throughout the conference, the organizers never lost sight of this most important group of people – the motivation behind building better communication skills.

Church: The idea here is to understand what's at stake: those 25 million veterans who were willing to put everything on the line for us and the least we can do for them is tell the good story of this nation's commitment to their sacrifice; a story that isn't always told the way it needs to be told. But we're going to change that.

Participant: What everyone looks forward to is the networking with other public affairs officer.

Participant: Coming from San Francisco, one of the issues we are always dealing with is crisis communication because we are earthquake country.

Participant: Besides that, when you have Secretary of Veterans Affairs Anthony Principi speaking, what can I say, it's been the best ever.

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